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Evidence about the Existence of a Hiding Place on Mount Horeb Related to the Temple of Jerusalem

By Flavio Barbiero

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Evidence about the Existence of a Hiding Place on Mount Horeb Related to the Temple of Jerusalem

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It would be different if we could find precise references to this hiding place in the Bible itself or some independent and equally ancient sources. This expectation, however, looks naïve. The primary prerogative of a secret is that of being kept "secret." It is obvious that their actual owners avoided talking about it and controlled as far as they could the "media" of their time, trying to prevent the news about its existence from becoming public.

Surprisingly, however, there is a host of direct references about such a hiding place in the Bible itself, which is a product of that same caste of priests who were the owners of the secret, sometimes coarsely disguised by evident corruptions, but in the whole quite clear and reliable. The references are precise and reliable also in non-canonic and apocryphal books. They provide a large amount of coherent information that cannot be discarded.

I. The High Priest Hilkiah Comes Across "The Book of the Law"

The first clue about the existence of a secret hiding place, related to Jerusalem's Temple and controlled by the high priest, can be found in 2 Chron. 34,14 and in 2 Kings 23,24. It was the year 622 B.C. After more than forty years during which the Jerusalem Temple had been devoted to the cult of heathen idols, King Josiah had just ordered the restoration of the ancient faith: "*Now in the eighteenth year of his reign, when he had purged the land and the house, he sent Shaphan the son of Azaliah, and Maaseiah the governor of the city, and Joah the son of Joahaz the recorder, to repair the house of the Lord his God. And when they came to Hilkiah the high priest, they delivered the money that was brought into the house of God … and when they brought out the money that was brought into the house of the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found a book of the law of the Lord given by Moses. And Hilkiah answered and said to Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord. And Hilkiah delivered the book to Shaphan.*"

Considering that the Temple was devoted to heathen cults for several decades, it appears improbable that the book was simply forgotten in some dark corner. It is more likely that it was kept in a secret hiding place well known to Hilkiah.

II. Jeremiah and Baruch Hide Temple's Sacred Furniture "Underground"

The finding of the "book of the law" is only a clue hinting at the existence of a hiding place. A precise confirmation, however, can be found in an event that occurred only 35 years later: "*In the ninth year of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the tenth month, came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army against Jerusalem and they besieged it.*" After two years of siege, "*in the fifth month, in the seventh day of the month, which is the nineteenth year of king Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, a servant of the king of Babylon, unto Jerusalem: and he burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem.*" *(2 Re 25, 8-21).*

If a hiding place really existed, we have to assume it was used to secure some of the Temple's most sacred furniture on that occasion. However, not a single word hinting at the existence of some hiding places is found in "2 Kings" or "Jeremiah," the two books of the Bible that report those events with many details.

There are, however, some non "canonic" texts, the so-called "Intertestamentarian Texts" (Ed Gallimard, 1987), which report those same events. Particularly significant, amongst them, are the "Paralipomenes of Jeremiah" and the "Apocalypses of Baruch". Both of them describe at length what happened during the destruction of Jerusalem, and they insist on the fact that on that occasion, some sacred objects of the Temple had been hidden "underground". Examples:

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In Cap. III, 3 of "Paralipomena of Jeremiah" it is written:

"Jeremiah said: - Now we know, o my Lord, that you will put the city in the hands of its enemies and that they will take the population to Babylon. What can we do of the saint things and of the vases sacred to your cult? What do you want that we do? And the Lord said; - Take them and entrust them to the earth … Jeremiah and Buruch got into the sanctuary and entrusted the sacred vases to the earth, as the Lord had commanded. And immediately the earth swallowed them up."

- in Baruch VI, 1-9, it is said that "*The day after the Chaldaean army surrounded the city …. And I saw an angel descend into the Holy of Holies, and take from it the veil, and the saint ephod and the two tablets, and the sacred priests' vest, the altar of incense, the 48 precious stones carried by the priest and all the sacred vases of the tent. And he cried to the Earth in a loud voice, 'Earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the mighty God, and receive what I commit to you, and guard them until the last times, so that, when you are ordered, you may restore them, and strangers may not get possession of them … And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up."*

- in Baruch LXXX, 1-2: "*... when the city was surrounded, the angels of the Almighty were sent … and they hid certain sacred vases, so that the enemy may not get possession of them."*

III. Jeremiah and the Cave on Mount Horeb

These quotations are significant and support the hypothesis about the existence of a secret hiding place where holy furniture and texts were secured whenever Jerusalem's Temple was threatened. However, the information they convey is vague and imprecise. No clue is provided about the nature and location of the hiding place (it is only said that it was "*underground*").

There is, however, another "non-canonic" book, 2 Maccabees, which reports the fact that Jeremiah had hidden some holy objects in a secret cave, the entry to which he then accurately sealed and concealed:

2 Mac. 2,4-12 "It is on record that the prophet Jeremiah … warned by an oracle, gave orders for the tent and the ark to go with him when he set out for the mountain which Moses had climbed to survey God's heritage. On his arrival, Jeremiah found a cave-dwelling, into which he put the tent, the ark and the altar of incense, afterwards blocking up the entrance. Some of his companions went back later to mark out the path but could not find it. When Jeremiah learned this, he reproached them, 'The place is to remain unknown', he said, 'until God gathers his people together again and shows them his mercy. Then the Lord will bring these things once more to light, and the glory of the God will be seen, and so will the cloud, as it was revealed in the time of Moses and when Solomon prayed that the holy place might be gloriously hallowed.'

It was also recorded how Solomon, in his wisdom, offered the sacrifice of the dedication and completion of the sanctuary. As Moses had prayed to the Lord and fire had come down from heaven and burned up the sacrifice, so Solomon also prayed, and the fire from above consumed the burnt offerings." (The New Jerusalem Bible)

This passage is quite interesting because it conveys precise and detailed information about the location and nature of the hiding place, even reporting that its entry was accurately sealed and disguised.

At first reading, however, it looks untrustworthy, as the facts it reveals are stunning and have no evident connection with events reported in the Bible. In particular:

a) The first information which appears to be unworthy of any credit is that the crypt was located no less than on Mount Horeb;
b) A second unbelievable information relates to the objects hidden by Jeremiah, amongst which the Tabernacle, the altar of incense and the ark of covenant are recorded;
c) A third point, which is, to say the least, hitherto unknown, is the mention of King Solomon, who, according to this account, went to Mount Horeb and celebrated on its top a dedication ceremony, like the one celebrated centuries earlier by Moses. If it really happened, such an event is of great historical relevance and should be reported in Solomon's chronicles. Instead, nothing of this kind is mentioned in the chronicles of this king.

However, it is possible to demonstrate that the information provided by 2 Maccabees is supported down to the smallest detail by precise cross-reference in the Bible.

IV. Location of the Secret Crypt

Let us start with the location of the hiding place. The indications given by 2 Maccabees prove that it refers to Mount Horeb.

First, there is the reference to a cave, whose existence is well known on Mount Horeb, as there are other quotations in the Bible.

Then there is the mention of Moses' consecration ceremony with the appearance of the "cloud and the Glory of God," exactly as on Mount Horeb. But the most significant clue is that the mountain is identified as the one on which Moses had seen "*God's heritage*," the same words used in Exodus 15,17 related to Mount Horeb.

Most exegetes find this conclusion so incredible that they prefer to strain the meaning of the text, specifying that it was instead Mount Nebo.

The main reason for their reluctance to accept the indications of 2 Maccabees is probably the fact that those same exegetes identify Mount Horeb with the Gebel el Musa, in the St. Catherine massif, too far away from Jerusalem to be regularly visited by the Temple's priests. Another reason might be the widespread opinion that the holy mountain was not a real mountain

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but rather an ideal one, the location of which was not known to the Jews.

The distance from Jerusalem becomes a minor problem if we agree with Prof. Emmanuel Anati that Mount Horeb was in the area of Har Karkom, a mountain in the Negev, which he identified with Sinai. The second reason is easily refuted if we give credit to those passages of the Bible showing that during Judah's reign, the location of Mount Horeb was well known to the Jewish priests. The 2 Maccabees account is one of these passages. Also well known is the lengthy account in chapter 19 of 1 Kings, which describes the journey of the prophet Elijah to Mount Horeb in the seventh century B.C.

> "*(Elijah) arose and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb, the mount of God. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there … and it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave.*"

The account does not contain any helpful elements for localizing the mountain. However, it is focused on a feature that is also mentioned in Exodus 33,22: "*the cleft of the rock*," where Moses hid himself at God's passage. In Elijah, the "cleft" is described as a proper cave and becomes the most characteristic element of that mountain, thus supporting the passage of 2 Maccabees, where the cave is the central element of the account of Jeremiah's visit to the holy mountain.

We must assume that the Jewish priest knew the location of Mount Horeb before the destruction of Jerusalem, but there is evidence that this knowledge was not lost on that occasion.

In a letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul says that he went incognito for three years in the land of the Nabateans, Arabia. In the same letter, he states, "Sinai is a mountain of Arabia" (Gal. 4,25), demonstrating that he knew where it was. This notion survived at least until the Renaissance, when maps of "Arabia Petraea and Desert" were produced, showing the position of Mount Sinai and Horeb just in front of Petra, the capital of the Nabateans.

Another objection might be that according to some quoted verses, we could understand that the crypt was "under" Jerusalem's Temple or in its immediate surroundings. The high priest Hilkiah, for instance, states that he had found the book of the law "inside" the Temple during the restoration works. It does not mean anything because if the hiding place was secret, we must assume he was not so naïve as to reveal its existence and location. Also, "Paralipomena of Jeremiah" III, II-14 simply states that Jeremiah and Baruch entered the Temple and hid the sacred vases underground; from what we might understand that the hiding place was in the Temple's area.

There is, however, an indication that conflicts with this conclusion and precisely the fact that it was Jeremiah, with Baruch's help (they were both priests, but not in the Temple's service), who hid the holy objects in the crypt, and not the high priest Saraja himself, as we should expect. A logical explanation is that the hiding place was outside the walls of Jerusalem. Being the city besieged, it was out of Saraja's reach. Jeremiah, instead, enjoyed complete freedom of movement, as proven by the verses Jer. 39, 11-12*:* "*Now Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon gave charge concerning Jeremiah to Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, saying: take him, and look well to him, and do him no harm; but do unto him even as he shall say unto thee*".

This is the reason why Saraja charged Jeremiah to hide the sacred vessels.

V. Objects Hidden in the Crypt - the Tabernacle

There is no serious objection to the possibility that the secret crypt could be located on Mount Horeb, but of course, the indications given in 2 Maccabees do not prove that such a crypt really existed and that it was on that mountain. More robust evidence is needed to prove it, supporting them point by point.

This evidence can be found if we examine the list of objects supposedly hidden by Jeremiah in the cave. In 2 Maccabees, the Ark of the Covenant, the Tabernacle and the altar of the burnt offering are named.

No mention of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant is made in the other passages describing the objects hidden by Jeremiah and Baruch. In Baruch IV, 1-9, only the altar of the incense together with the veil, the ephod, the breastplate, the tables of the law, the sacred vestment of the priests, the 48 precious stones and the sacred vases are listed. Somewhere else, only the sacred vases are mentioned.

It appears immediately unlikely that Jeremiah could have transported and hidden on the holy mountain such large objects as the ark of covenant, the Tabernacle and the altar of burning offering, if nothing else for practical reasons. The Tabernacle was heavy and bulky. "*Six carts pulled by two oxen*" were necessary to transport it, and a large number of people were needed for the transport of all other objects connected to it: 4 for the ark of the covenant, 8 for the altar of burning offering ... (see Numbers 7.1-9). Out of the question where Jeremiah is concerned because we must assume that he left Jerusalem and reached the secret hiding place unobserved, with a minimal train and without any conspicuous object.

Why, then, in 2 Maccabees, not only the Ark of the Covenant but also the Tabernacle and the altar of the burning offerings are mentioned? A likely explanation for this question could be that Jeremiah had not put those objects in the cave but had only "seen" them on

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that occasion. He later told what he had seen to someone else, who, in the successive reporting of the facts, introduced some "small imprecision". Those objects, therefore, must have been put into Mount Horeb's cave well before Jeremiah went there.

The Jews made the Tabernacle in the wilderness on Moses' instruction. Exodus devotes several chapters to a meticulous description of this extraordinary object, indicating its enormous importance in the Exodus' events. In the following books, the Tabernacle is the fulcrum of all actions; the Jewish people's life and every movement rotate around it.

During the march towards Palestine, the Tabernacle was erected in the Moab valley, and it was inside it that Moses gathered the Jewish people for his last great speech, as reported by Deuteronomy. The Tabernacle followed Joshua into Palestine, and at the end of the war operations, it was erected in Shiloh. It was in Shiloh, inside the Tabernacle, that the newly conquered territory was allotted to the tribes of Israel (Joshua, 18.1).

After that, the Tabernacle disappears from the Bible's chronicles. Nowhere is written about what happened to such an important object. In the absence of information about it, we have to make some conjecture. The alternative is between two hypotheses: either the Tabernacle was somehow destroyed, or it was stored in some secret and secure hiding place.

The Bible provides precise indications that make this second hypothesis the most likely, as it plainly states that the Tabernacle was to be found on Mount Horeb at least four centuries before Jeremiah's time.

VI. The High Place of Gibeon

In Chronicles and Kings, it is repeatedly reported that during David and Solomon's time (therefore, at least 200 years after the partition of Palestine, when the very last reference to that object is made), the Tabernacle was to be found on the "*high place of Gibeon*".

Exegetes identify this Gibeon with the homonymous Canaanite town we meet in Joshua 9, at the beginning of Palestine's conquest. The Gibeonites avoided destruction by sending Joshua a delegation, which got an alliance treaty from him through an expedient. From then on, Gibeon is mentioned only a few times, always to specify that its inhabitants were still living amongst the Jews, although they were Canaanites. The existence of a sacred high place near Gibeon is never suggested.

Then suddenly, during David and Solomon's time, this "sacred high place of Gibeon" makes its unexpected appearance, seemingly playing an essential role in the events of that period, as it was "*the great high place*."

Following are the passages which mention it:

- 1 Chro, 21,29: "The Tabernacle and the altar of the burnt offering were at that season in the high place of Gibeon. But David could not go before it to inquire of God: for he was afraid because of the sword of the angel of the Lord."

- 1 Cro, 16,39: "(David appointed) Zadok the priest, and his brethren the priests, before the tabernacle of the Lord in the high place that was in Gibeon ..."

- 1 Re, 3,4: "And the King (Solomon) went to Gibeon to sacrifice there; for that was the great high place: a thousand burnt offerings did Solomon offer upon that altar. In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon …"

- 2 Cro, 1,3: "Solomon .. went to the high place that was at Gibeon; for there was the tabernacle of the congregation of God, which Moses the servant of the Lord had made in the wilderness … moreover the brazen altar, that Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur had made, he put before the tabernacle of the Lord … and Solomon went up thither to the brazen altar before the Lord, which was at the tabernacle of the congregation, and offered a thousand burnt offerings upon it ."

- 1 Re, 9,2: "The Lord appeared to Solomon the second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon ..."

The information conveyed by these verses is astonishing and highly significant. In essence, it says that in David and Solomon's time, there was a holy mountain, which was the most important of all; that on that mountain, the Tabernacle made by Moses in the wilderness and the altar of the burning offering were to be found; that king Solomon went there for the only reason that the Tabernacle and the altar were there; and finally that he offered upon it a thousand burnt offerings to the Lord, who honoured him by appearing.

This is the same information conveyed by the account of 2 Maccabees related to Mount Horeb. Could this mysterious "*high place of Gibeon*" be identified with Mount Horeb? The only reason that links this high place with the Canaanite town spared by Joshua during the conquest of Palestine is the name bestowed on it: "*Gibeon*". The word Gibeon - what a coincidence! - means "*mount*". The quoted verses, therefore, refer to a well-known and important mountain that did not need any other name to be identified: it was simply "*the mount*".

VII. Hanging of Saul's Descendants on the Mount of Yahweh

A passage of 2 Samuel openly states that this was the *"hill of Yahweh"* and, therefore, Mount Horeb and it furthermore links that mountain directly to the family of Jerusalem's priests.

2 Sam 21, 1 reports that:

"In the days of David there was a famine which lasted for three years on end. David consulted Yahweh, and Yahweh said, 'Saul and his family have incurred blood-guilt, by putting the Gibeonites to death.' Then the king summoned the Gibeonites and said - now the Gibeonites were not

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Israelites, but were a remnant of the Amorites, to whom the Israelites had bound themselves by oath; Saul, however, in his zeal for the Israelites and Judah, had done his best to exterminate them - *hence David said to the Gibeonites, 'What can I do for you? How can I make amends, so that you will call a blessing down on Yahweh's heritage?' The Gibeonites replied, 'Our quarrel with Saul and his family cannot be settled for silver or gold, nor by putting to death one man in Israel.' David said, 'Say what you want and I will do it for you.' Then they replied to the king, 'The man who dismembered us and planned to annihilate us, so that we should not exist anywhere in Israelite territory - we want seven of his descendants handed over to us; and we shall dismember them* ***before Yahweh at Gibeon on Yahweh's hill****.' 'I shall hand them over', said the king. The king, however, spare Meribbaal son of Jonathan, son of Saul, on account of the oath by Yahweh binding them together, binding David and Jonathan son of Saul. The king took the two sons born to Saul by Rizpah daughter of Aiah: Armoni and Meribbaal; and the five sons borne by Merab daughter of Saul to Adriel son of Barzillai, of Meholah. He handed them over to the Gibeonites, who dismembered them* ***before Yahweh on the hill****. The seven of them perished together; they were put to death in the first days of the harvest, at the beginning of the barley harvest.*" (The New Jerusalem Bible).

No mention is made in Saul's chronicles about a supposed relation between the king and the Canaanite town of Gibeon, let alone that he attempted to its inhabitants' lives! If he had committed an action so evil against them as to merit the divine wrath and such extremely cruel punishment, it would have indeed been reported in the chronicles of the king.

VIII. Saul Exterminates the "Gibeonites" (The Priests of Nob)

Samuel's books report, instead, with horror and many details, the news about a monstrous crime committed by Saul during his reign, when he killed not Gibeon's inhabitants but a whole family of Judah's priests. This episode is reported in 1 Sam.22.11:

"*Then the king send to call Ahimelek the priest, the son of Ahitub, and all his father's house, the priests that were in Nob: and they came, all of them, to the king. And Saul said, Hear now thou son of Ahitub. And he answered, Here I am, my Lord. And Saul said unto him, Why have ye conspired against me, thou and the son of Jesse, in that thou hast given him bread, and a sword, and hast enquired of God for him, that he should rise against me, to lie in wait, as at this day? Then Ahimelek answered the king, and said, And who is so faithful among all thy servants as David, which is the king's son in law, and goeth at thy bidding, and is honorable in thine house? Did I then begin to inquire of God for him? Be it far from me: let not the king impute anything unto his servant, nor to all the house of my father: for thy servant knew nothing of all this, less or more.*

And the king said, Thou shalt surely die, Ahimelech, thou and all thy father's house. And the king said unto the footmen that stood about him, Turn and sly the priests of the Lord; because their hand also is with David, and because they knew when he fled, and did not shew it to me. But the servants of the king would not put forth their hand to fall upon the priests of the Lord.

And the king said to Doeg, Turn thou and fall upon the priests. And Doeg the Edomite turned, and he fell upon the priests, and slew on that day fourscore and five persons that did wear a linen ephod. And Nob, the city of the priests, smote he with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword.

And one of the sons of Ahimelech the son of Ahitub, named Abiatar, escaped and fled after David. And Abiatar shewed David that Saul had slain the Lord's priests. And David said unto Abiatar, I knew it that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul: I have occasioned the death of all the persons of thy father's house. Abide thou with me, fear not: for he that seeketh my life seeketh thy life; but with me thou shalt be in safeguard."

This crime was so appalling that it cried out for vengeance to God and the whole of Israel. Nevertheless, according to the Bible versions, it went unpunished, as no mention is made of any consequences for Saul or his descendants because of it. God, instead, and King David on his behalf, according to 2 Sam.21,2, were irate with Israel and Saul's descendants because of an unknown act committed by the king against a population - Gibeon's inhabitants - who were not even Israelite! The least we can say is that it does not make sense.

If we translate the word "Gibeonites" with "those of the holy mountain, " immediately everything becomes clear.

"Those of the holy mountain" could be none other than the family of the priests, whom Saul nearly annihilated at Nob, accusing the high priest Ahimelech of having backed his rival David. The survivors and David himself, who felt responsible for what had happened, could not possibly leave such a crime unpunished. The punishment was perfectly appropriate: Saul's family members were hanged by "those of the holy mountain" in front of Yahweh, in a high place sacred to him. Undoubtedly, it was Mount Horeb.

There is also no doubt that the "Gibeonites", annihilated by Saul in 2 Sam.21, were the members of the priests' family. It proves that there was a strict relationship between that family and the mountain, which they visited regularly. Only they were entitled to do it because, as we learn from verse 1Chro.21,29, Moses' interdiction to climb up the mountain was still in force for everybody but the priests. That is why David refused to go there, "*for he was afraid because of the sword of the angel of the Lord*." (1Chro, 21,29).

IX. Zadok Appointed as Custodian of the Hiding Place on the Mountain

Given what has been stated so far, the verse: "*(David appointed) Zadok the priest before the Tabernacle of the Lord in the high place that was in*

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Gibeon ..." *(*1Chro, 16,39) becomes significant and important.

Together with verses 1 Chron. 21,29 and 2 Chron. 1,3, it confirms that the Tabernacle was to be found on Mount Horeb, evidently in the same place where Jeremiah would see it four centuries later, that is, in the secret cave.

Second, it means that David gave the "proprietorship" of the cave and its contents to the priests' family who ruled Jerusalem's Temple. Zadok became the high priest of Jerusalem when Abiatar was exiled to Anatot, and this office stayed with his family well beyond the exile to Babylon. During this period, the high priests of Jerusalem, and therefore Hilkiah and Saraja, were the legitimate "custodians" of the cave on Mount Horeb, where the Tabernacle and the Ark of Covenant were stored. It is not out of place to presume that they utilized it in times of hardship to hide the most sacred and precious objects of the Temple.

X. Conclusion

The passage of 2 Maccabees, which at first reading looks unreliable, is supported point by point by precise cross-reference in Samuel, Chronicles, and Kings. Overall, the evidence pointing to the existence of a hiding place on Mount Horeb is quite strong, as the cross-references are consistent and independent from each other.

Furthermore, the fact that those verses were somehow “manipulated” to avoid any direct hint to Mount Horeb (and to the hiding place upon it) proves that a specific "censorship" was exercised on the Bible on this subject, which is a further element in favour of its existence and of the enormous importance it had for the priests of Jerusalem.

In conclusion, the information we gather from these verses looks credible. We can summarize it as follows:

1. There has been a cave on Mount Horeb since Moses' time, the entrance of which was well concealed.
2. After the partition of Palestine, the Tabernacle, the altar of burnt offerings, the Ark of Covenant and other sacred objects were stored in that cave.
3. King David appointed the high priests of Jerusalem as custodians of the cave.
4. During Judah’s reign, the priests of Jerusalem used the crypt to hide the Temple's most precious objects in times of danger.
5. When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, the high priest Saraja asked Jeremiah, who had then complete freedom of movement, to hide in the secret crypt some precious vessels of the Temple, giving him precise instructions on how to find it and how to keep it secret.

At this point, the main question remains: Where was Mount Horeb? It is supposed that during the exile in Babylon, knowledge of its location and the secret of its hiding place was lost. However, there are testimonies about people who visited it afterwards, well supported by solid archaeological evidence. This is what we expect to know from the ongoing research in the area of Har Karkom.

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